

On the Transformation and Characteristics of Aesthetic Practice in the Ming Dynasty (明代)

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Abstract: Traditional Chinese social concepts have always been controlled and constrained by the thinking of “wén yǐ zài dào”(Literature Is the Vehicle of Ideas, in Chinese “文以載道”), but the so-called “wén yǐ zài dào”(Literature Is the Vehicle of Ideas, in Chinese “文以載道”) here is an extremely generalized concept. The “wén” (literature, in Chinese “文”) here can refer to any kind of material carrier, image or action. In short, it is a material presentation related to the physical world. The “dào” (Tao, in Chinese “道”) here refers to any kind of spiritual essence. In the view of traditional Chinese literati, the form must be loaded with a certain spiritual essence in order to have meaning. Through the study of the visual arts of the Ming Dynasty (明代), we will find that in the Ming Dynasty (明代), no matter the presentation of various objects such as clothing, furniture, book illustrations and literati painting or physical activities such as entertainments and travels have already broken away from the thinking mode of “wén yǐ zài dào” (Literature Is the Vehicle of Ideas, in Chinese “文以載道”). Not only has the aesthetic form separated from its core and existed independently, but the form has also begun to develop in the direction of expansion.

Key Words: Ming Dynasty (明代); aesthetic practice; formalization; clothing; furniture; book illustrations

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the aesthetic trends and fashion, the way of examining beauty and the artistic creation of China in the Ming Dynasty (明代), especially in the middle and late periods. It deeply analyzes the dressing style, furniture, interior space design, illustrations, literati painting and the psychology behind the Ming Dynasty (明代) people's travel and leisure activities. It attempts to grasp the transformation and characteristics of the thinking mode of aesthetic practice in the Ming Dynasty (明代), that is, what makes it different from previous dynasties. This article adopts qualitative research methods. As the author, I sorted out and carefully examined relevant ancient documents and historical materials, and combined with some existing research results, and discussed the issues and topics set by this paper through the analysis of details, so as to reach a conclusion.

2. Analysis

2.1. Strange and indescribable clothing which astonished people

In traditional Chinese society, clothing has a corresponding relationship with class, that is, specific clothing always represents a specific social class, identity, gender, etc. In other words, appareling does not simply mean dressing up, it always carries a certain power structure. Clothing matches status and to some extent points to the function of maintaining order by distinguishing between superiors and inferiors. The emperors of the Ming Dynasty (明代) all set detailed specifications for clothing. For example, during the Hongwu (洪武) period of the Ming Dynasty (明代), scholars had to wear clothes with wide sleeves and the edges of their clothes and hats had to be black. As for the clothes of ordinary people, they can only be made of silk and plain gauze, not silk and brocade; jewelry, shoes, hats, scarves and rings must be as plain as possible, and coral, agate, gold thread, etc. are not allowed.

Faced with such detailed and rigid regulations, however, many people have begun to transcend social hierarchy and even gender differences in their clothing, and blindly pursue exquisite, gorgeous, novel and unique aesthetic forms. Li Le (李乐, 1532—1618), the author of *Miscellaneous Notes of What I've Seen*

and Heard (见闻杂记) once wrote, “The colors of patterns on the rich young men’s clothes are very similar to women’s makeup, and the decorations on their hats are unspeakably weird.” (富贵公子衣色, 大类女妆, 巾式诡异难状。) Since men have put their appeal to aesthetic forms into the selection of clothing styles and colors, women were even more eager to innovate in every detail of clothing and hairstyle, such as the design of cuffs, skirts and buns. In the *Annals of Jiangdu County* (江都县志) during the Wanli (万历) period of the Ming Dynasty (明代), the costumes of civilian women in Yangzhou (扬州) were described in this way, “Jewelry made of gold and jade, interspersed with pearls and emerald feather. The women are dressed in gorgeous, embroidered silk clothes, which are extremely extravagant.” (镂金玉属首饰, 杂以明珠翠羽, 被服绮绣, 其侈丽极矣。) The Songjiang Prefecture Chronicle (松江府志) during the Chongzhen (崇祯) period of the Ming Dynasty (明朝) recorded: “Women’s chignons have also changed from time to time. Some are decorated with beads or pendants hanging from the back, while others are decorated with emerald ornaments in the shape of dragons and phoenixes.” (女子髻亦时变, 有缀以珠或垂络于后, 亦有翠饰焉龙凤者。)

From the above examples recorded in Chinese classical literature, it can be seen that people in the Ming Dynasty (明代) paid attention to the advanced sense and style of materials, and novelty of colors in clothing and accessories. Differences in gender and social class have been eliminated to some extent in such pursuit of form. This aesthetic view reflects that people in the Ming Dynasty (明代) were not satisfied with stagnation in form, but instead strived to pursue breakthroughs in visual sensory effects.

However, clothing carries strong political symbols and is used as a tool to solidify class, especially in ancient society, both in China and the West. The French historian Audrey Millet, in her book *The History of Global Fashion* (in French, *Histoire de la mode de l’Antiquité à nos jours*), used the ancient Roman toga as an example to illustrate the sociality attached to clothing: “Clothing is a discriminatory sign that makes it easy to identify the wearer. The Toga was the ‘uniform’ of the citizens, and its distinction from so-called barbarian or foreign clothing allowed it to retain Roman values. Clothing creates a system of relationships made up of similarities and differences. It indicates status, age, gender, group affiliation, superiority and inferiority.” So, can aesthetic intentions play a role in fomenting revolution on a symbolic level? In some certain historical circumstances, the answer may be yes. When the storming of the Bastille became a symbol of the French Revolution, related patterns and images appeared on the fans and buttons of revolutionaries, and red and blue, the colors representing freedom, were widely used on hats and jackets. “Clothing manufacturers turned revolutionary slogans into marketing strategies in an effort to save a struggling clothing industry, which was in trouble because of the loss of a large number of wealthy customers due to increasingly simple fabrics and simplified clothing styles.” Clothing and revolution promote, assist or even midwifery each other.

So can the Ming Dynasty’s clothing, which was “rapidly changing with the years and pursuing the most rare and precious stuff” (岁变月新, 务穷珍异), be considered as a revolutionary act?

According to the *Newly Revised Yuyao County Chronicles* (新修余姚县志) during the Wanli (万历) period, “People from all of towns and households, regardless of their social statuses, wore square scarves and long clothes. Recently, people have tended to be strange and ostentatious. Their scarves must shock the crowd and they were even dressed in royal clothes, which must be in stark contrast to the common people and be bordered with silk.” (邑井别户, 无贵贱率方巾长服。近且趋奇炫诡, 巾必骇众, 而饰以王服, 必耀俗而缘以綵。)

Zhang Han (张瀚, 1513-1595), the author of *Somniloquy from the Pine Window* (松窗梦语), once lamented, “The standards and styles of clothing for men and women in the imperial court were originally regulated and required. Today, men wear silk and brocade, and women adorn themselves with gold and pearls. This is both presumptuous and beyond the limits of state prohibitions.” (国朝士女服饰, 皆有定制。今男子服锦绮, 女子饰金珠, 是皆僭拟无涯, 踰国家之禁者也。)

In the *Ganzhou Prefecture Records* (赣州府志) compiled by Ming Dynasty (明代) scholars Yu Wenlong (余文龙) and Xie Zhao (谢诏), there is a rebuke: “Clothing and utensils are no longer divided into noble

and humble. What does the law say about the crime of committing a rebellion against one's superiors?" (服饰器用，不分贵贱。犯上亡等，法制谓何?)

The above quotation seems to imply that a bloody storm is about to come. However, as we all know, the Ming Dynasty (明代) was destroyed due to the prevalence of plague, corruption and wars in border areas. In terms of the overall political atmosphere, the transgression of the royal order by clothing styles in the middle and late Ming Dynasty (明代) was not a revolutionary revolt, but more of a catharsis, a release of inner emotions through aesthetic carnival within suffocating rules, regulations and restrictions, a transformation of money possession into aesthetic practice, and an attempt by the wealthy but powerless class to cross the line, however stopped at a certain point of where it should. Its essence is the aesthetic behavior without power attributes, and aesthetic activities that temporarily eliminate class and even gender differences. We can call it an aesthetic party, the slogans of this weird party might be "If there is wine today, then today is the day to get drunk" (今宵有酒今宵醉), and "When hopes are won, drink your fill in high delight" (人生得意须尽欢).

2.2. The pursuit of refined and exquisite furniture by the common class in the Ming Dynasty (明代)

The furniture and antiques industry developed vigorously and prospered during the Ming Dynasty (明代). There is a passage in the novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅词话) that describes Wu Yue Niang's (吴月娘) visit to Linqing Street (临清街) to enjoy the lantern market, as follows: "Looking east, there are carved lacquer beds and Raden beds, shining with gold and jade; looking west, there are sheepskin lamps and colorful lanterns, dazzling with brocade. The northern area is full of antiques and curios; the southern area is full of calligraphy and paintings, bottles and stoves." (往东看，雕漆床，螺钿床，金碧交辉；向西瞧，羊皮灯，掠彩灯，锦绣夺目。北一带都是古董玩器；南壁厢，尽皆书画瓶炉。) The vivid descriptions in the novel reflect the grand scene of selling antique and furniture in the market at that time.

During the Ming Dynasty (明代), from Wanli (万历) to Tianqi (天启), an unknown artist painted "The Scroll of Lantern Festival Paintings" (上元灯彩图卷), which delicately displays the market scene of the Qinhuai River (秦淮河) area in Nanjing (南京), where the Lantern Festival fair and antique trade are combined. Tables, desks, stools, beds, screens and official headgear chairs of various styles and materials all appear in this painting.

Yao Tinglin (姚廷遴), a historian in the late Ming Dynasty (明代) and early Qing Dynasty (清代), once recalled the scenes he saw in Songjiang Prefecture (松江府) in his childhood in his book *Chronicles* (历年记). He wrote: "When I was young, I went to the county and saw the customs of the city. Although the city was small, there were many famous officials, dense flagpoles, and memorial archways on the road. Even in the smallest households and the poorest lanes, if people living there only had one room, would have gold-painted tables and chairs, famous paintings, ancient stoves, vases, and tea sets, all neatly laid out." (余幼年到郡，看城中风俗，池郭虽小，名宦甚多，旗桿稠密，牌坊满路。至如极小之户，极贫之弄，住房一间者，必有金漆桌椅，名画古炉，花瓶茶具，而铺设整齐。) It can be seen that for the people of the Ming Dynasty (明代), the gap between rich and poor has nothing to do with the level of taste. And the home life of the Ming Dynasty (明代) people always seems to be in an atmosphere of highly aesthetic formalism. Such high pursuit of aesthetic form for home living environment is not exclusive to a certain class or type of people.

The secular novels of the Ming Dynasty (明代) presented to future generations the pursuit of exquisite furnishings by all kinds of people at that time. For example, the design of the study room of the nouveau riche Ximen Qing (西门庆) was described in *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅词话), as follows:

"On the floor was a marble black lacquered gold-lined bed, with green gauze curtains hanging over it. On both sides were colorful lacquered and gold-lined bookcases filled with gift-giving handkerchiefs, rulers, a few stationeries, and books. Under the green gauze window, there was a black lacquered Seven-

stringed Zither/ ku-ch' in (古琴) table, with a single Raden chair.” (地上安着一张大理石黑漆缕金凉床, 挂着青纱帐幔。两边采漆描金书橱, 盛的都是送礼的书帕、尺头, 几席文具, 书籍堆满。绿纱窗下, 安放一只黑漆琴桌, 独独放着一张螺钿交椅。) Although it is a novel, it reflects the real fashion and background of the time. The life interests and aesthetic tastes of the wealthy businessmen at that time are vividly depicted in the author' s writing.

In addition, Feng Menglong (冯梦龙, 1574-1646) described the study of Xie Yuying (谢玉英), a famous prostitute in Jiangzhou (江州), in Volume 12 of *Stories Old and New* (喻世明言), as follows:

“Bright windows, clean desks, bamboo couches and teapots. A famous Seven-stringed Zither/ ku-ch' in (古琴) hangs between the beds, and an ancient painting hangs on the wall. The fragrant wind never dissipates, and the precious furnace is always burning sandalwood; the cool breeze is pressing, and the vase is frequently filled with new water. Ten thousand volumes of books are available for reading, and a chess game is played to entertain.” (明窗净几, 竹榻茶龕。床间挂一张名琴, 壁上悬一幅古画。香风不散, 宝炉中常熬沉檀; 清风逼人, 花瓶内频添新水。万卷图书供玩览, 一枰棋局佐欢娱。) Through the above descriptions of Ximen Qing and Xie Yuying's study in these two Ming Dynasty novels, we can easily find that the emphasis on the design sense of the living environment, the pursuit of a refined and elegant living atmosphere and the attention to aesthetic form are not the privilege of a certain social group, but have become the conscious pursuit of almost everyone of that era. Even the nouveau riche and prostitutes with relatively low social identity and status also attach great importance on the exquisiteness of the visual impression.

Books written by scholars in the middle and late Ming Dynasty (明代) even have special chapters describing the workmanship and shape of furniture, such as Wei Yong' s (卫泳) *Secret Book Treasured in the Pillow Box* (枕中秘), Tu Long' s (屠隆) *Desultory Remarks on Furnishing the Abode of the Retired Scholar* (考槃馀事) and Gao Lian' s (高濂) *Eight Notes to Follow a Healthy Life* (遵生八笺).

Like clothing, the Ming Dynasty (明代) people' s obsession with the craftsmanship and visual effects of furniture also reflects the emphasis people placed on aesthetic taste and aesthetic form themselves during that historical period. In addition, as just analyzed and summarized, such obsession is not limited to the intellectual and cultural elite, but has become a power shared by people from all strata of society.

2.3. “Pictures are used to describe forms” (图以写形) -- The precise depiction of objects in Ming Dynasty (明代) illustration art

The British art historian Alistair Craig Clunas once studied drawings on all materials in Ming Dynasty China (including book illustrations, murals, prints, patterns and stripes on clothing and interior decorations, etc.) and accomplished the book *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*. This book puts forward two core viewpoints. Firstly, the Chinese people' s dependence on and attention to visual forms increased day by day in the Ming Dynasty (明代), and even reached a certain peak. Secondly, Ming Dynasty (明代) paintings pursued resemblance in form rather than the spiritual resemblance. After collecting abundant first-hand physical data, Craig Clunas also referred to the research results of Chinese popular culture experts such as Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎), and finally came to the conclusion that the visual culture of the Ming Dynasty (明代) was extremely inflated.

Indeed, many texts of the Ming Dynasty (明代) were attached with graphic art, and some texts even fundamentally relied on images for dissemination. For example, the illustrations in *The Chinese Lute Story* (琵琶记) were carved by some of the most famous engravers of the time hired by Hangzhou (杭州) booksellers, and they display intricate and exquisite details.

According to statistics from Japanese historian Denda Akira (传田章), more than 60 different versions of *Romance of the West Chamber* (西厢记) were published in the Ming Dynasty (明代), of which more than 30 included illustrations, and almost all of the illustrated versions were published in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Some Ming Dynasty (明代) color-printed illustrated picture books used clichés such as “illustration” (图解), “holographic image” (全像) and “portrait” (肖像) as part of their promotional advertisements, or directly embedded them in the book titles. Due to the increasing demand of the public for visual culture, literati painters in the Ming Dynasty (明代) gradually transformed into professional painters, and more and more painters entered the book illustration industry. The most famous ones include Chen Hongshou (陈洪绶), Ding Yunpeng (丁云鹏) and Gu Bing (顾炳). The most significant difference in identity between literati painters and professional painters is that the former still focus on expressing the noble or lofty literati state of mind and still pursue the spirit beyond the image, while the latter turn more to decorative image expression and pursue lifelike resemblance. Precisely because the Ming Dynasty (明代) people valued the decorativeness and formality of visual arts, the professional status of professional printmakers, engravers and other craftsmen has been improved. They could even sign their works to demonstrate their fame and ownership.

What is most noteworthy is the change in concepts. A new viewpoint on the creation and function of visual art emerged in the Ming Dynasty. Obvious cracks began to appear in Chinese painting theory and the entire traditional Chinese art theory. A new force of concept quietly rose, that is, painting art is no longer centered on “artistic mood” (意境) and “spiritual resemblance” (神似), and no longer exists only to pursue the realm of implied meaning, but to present the object itself, to express the object more accurately. Gao Ru (高儒), the compiler and engraver of *Baichuan's Library Catalog* (百川书志), once said that “pictures are used to describe forms, and texts are used to record functions.” (图以写形, 文以记用) Craig Clunas commented on this statement, as follows: “His interest in ‘figurative’ pictures is clearly a far cry from the traditional theorists’ contempt for ‘figurative’, which suggests that attitudes towards figurative art in the 16th century were more diverse than those art critics would like to admit. The large number of pictures circulating through the medium of printing may have further accentuated this opposition and brought the issue of figurative art to the forefront.” This emphasis on the formal beauty of the image itself is consistent with the life attitude of the Ming Dynasty (明代) people.

2.4. The visual positivism style of Ming Dynasty (明代) literati painting

Chinese literati landscape paintings have always been focused on conveying the spirit of the subject. Their creative technique is called scattered perspective, which is different from Western focal perspective. The purpose of literati landscape paintings is not to depict objects, but to express their noble feelings that are attached to the landscape. However, some literati landscape paintings of the Ming Dynasty (明代) showed a shift towards simply depicting the landscape itself rather than expressing traditional literati sentiments, and even completely broke away from traditional composition and modeling conventions, opening up a realistic painting style of visual positivism.

For example, “Juqu's Wind in the Pine Forest” (句曲松风图) by Zhang Hong (张宏, 1577-1652), a painter from Suzhou (苏州) in the late Ming Dynasty (明代), depicts the scenery and space from a fixed perspective in accordance with the human visual response. The spatial arrangement of each section in the scene is also quite consistent. The visual effect created is that the viewer and the painter are standing at the same viewpoint, looking down at the scenery from above.

His “Shi Xie Mountain” (石屑山图) was also created in a way that's faithful to the visual sense, because as the trees gradually recede deeper and deeper into the background, their size becomes smaller and smaller, which is obviously different from the scattered perspective presentation of traditional Chinese painting.

Zhang Hong's (张宏) works are created using focal perspective. His depictions of scenery such as trees, bamboo forests, stone bridges and flowing water all emphasize the reality of distance, which is very convincing to the viewer's visual sense. This emphasis on the sense of spatial structure and the overlap between the painter's perspective and the viewer's perspective highlights the uniqueness of his work, which is realistic depiction rather than traditional Chinese style's vague impressionism.

Such painting concept that emphasizes the depiction of objects and the sense of physical space has attracted the attention of American sinologist James Cahill. In his view, Zhang Hong (张宏) has always taken breaking the traditional landscape imagery of Chinese painting to create a concrete painting style as his artistic ideal. He calls Zhang Hong's (张宏) works "first-hand observative outcome" and "vision report".

James Cahill made a detailed analysis of Zhang Hong's (张宏) works such as "Hua Zi Gang" (华子岗图) and "Zhi Yuan" (止园图), and came to the following conclusion: "Generally speaking, this painter has surpassed the typical Chinese landscape painting method of 'stacking' (堆叠) and grouping (结组). In his paintings, trees and hills not only stand in the light and air, but also because of this air and light, the trees and hills can have their shapes. The viewers could only see the scenery vaguely and incompletely under the limited visual visibility. The painter did not recognize, capture, and then reshape the scenery in an analytical way."

Indeed, traditional Chinese paintings completely disregard the spatial relationship between near and far when depicting various scenes, and pile up all the scenes on the picture regardless of distance, only seeking elegant subtlety (神韵), atmosphere, artistic appeal (气韵), vividness and vitality (气韵生动). Zhang Hong's (张宏) paintings were painted according to the proportionality. In traditional Chinese literati landscape paintings, the viewer's perspective is constantly shifting and changing at any time, but in Zhang Hong's (张宏) paintings, the viewers' perspective is fixed and has been set long ago.

As an important painter in the history of Ming Dynasty (明代) fine arts, Zhang Hong (张宏) represents the following trend and tendency in literati paintings in the middle and late Ming Dynasty (明代): making the object image and space structure themselves independent, and purely pursuing of formal authenticity, or we can call it "formal truth". The emphasis on the realism of the representational world and the attempt to present it accurately have destroyed the pursuit of the core and the Tao (道) loaded by the core in traditional painting theory and practice to some extent.

2.5. Travel and Leisure in the Ming Dynasty (明代)

As we all know, the traditional Chinese literati's hiking amongst the mountains and rivers is not for the purpose of sightseeing, leisure and entertainment, but either to demonstrate their reclusive feelings and noble character that refuses to follow the corrupt flow of the world, or to cultivate their temperament and realize Confucius' (孔子) moral ideal of "the benevolent find pleasure in mountains, and the wise find pleasure in water" (仁者乐山, 智者乐水), the value of traditional Chinese society has always been "trifling destroys the will/excessive attention to trivia saps the will" (玩物丧志), so few literati and scholars played for the sake of playing. Even if they did so in their actions, they were unlikely to express or publicize it clearly and explicitly in their writings.

However, we could sense special emphasis on the act of playing in the travel notes and essays of Ming Dynasty (明代) literati. There are several examples as following:

Chu Yi (储巖, 1457-1513) once wrote in his article "Postscript to a Tour of Famous Mountains" (题游名山记后): "Wherever I go, I always choose famous places to visit, wandering among them, and seeing the most secluded, strange and bizarre sights." (所至辄选名胜者以游, 徜徉其间, 极幽遐奇诡之观乃已。)

There is an article named "Visiting Guanyin Rock" (游观音岩) in the book *Travels to Famous Mountains* (游名山记), the author Du Mu (都穆, 1459-1525) wrote: "I heard that Guanyin Rock (观音岩) stands tall on the Yangtze River (长江) and is the most beautiful scenery in the world, but I can't climb it because of the long distance. On the 1st day of September, Mr. Qian, a clerk in the Ministry of Works, invited me and Mr. Mei, a soldier, to visit the rock." (闻观音岩, 屹然长江之上, 为天下绝景, 独以道远不及登。九月甲子, 工部司务钱君, 邀予及兵马梅君, 为兹岩之游。)

Chen Jiru (陈继儒, 1558-1639) wrote the article “Yanghu Thatched Cottage Diary” (阳湖草堂记) in a poetic and lyrical style: “Yanghu (阳湖) is a huge lake in Wuzhong (吴中), with thousands of hectares of vastness. It hugs Yufeng Mountain (玉峰) from the left, and holds the county from the right, delicate and pretty Yushan Mountain (虞山) is lying in the back. In spring, the shore is breezing angelica’s fragrance, the green willows are dancing; in summer, the lotus smells cool and the light clouds are swaying; in autumn and winter, there are fishermen singing under the moon that falls into reed flowers, there is the bright sky shining in the snow. The scene is fantastic enough for sightseeing and howling carefree.” (阳湖为吴中大泽, 滉潏数千顷, 左揽玉峰, 右带郡郭, 后挹虞山之秀爽。况乃春而岸芷吹香, 汀杨舞翠; 夏而荷气生凉, 轻云荡影; 秋冬而又渔歌坎乃于芦花之月, 空明晃映于雪霁之天, 足以资游览而啸傲。)

Ming dynasty (明代) writer Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道, 1570-1626) has a collection of his essays, called *Diary of Travel and Residence* (游居柿录), in this collection, there’s one paragraph as follows: “Maybe I can encounter spectacular mountains and rivers, wonderful friends, and spend a long time enjoying the pleasure of lingering that place to the fullest.” (庶几遇好山水, 好友朋, 可以久淹其间, 极登涉盘桓之趣。)

Looking through the travel notes of Ming Dynasty (明代) people, it’s not difficult to find out that the reason why Ming Dynasty (明代) literati indulged in mountains and rivers was because they wanted to capture unusual views or wonders and indulge in pleasure. What made them delighted and thrilled was a series of all-round sensory stimulation. They no longer deliberately cater to Confucius (孔子) or Tao Yuanming’s (陶渊明) view of nature, they no longer travel with lofty ambitions as a burden, they no longer pretend to lament that their talents are not appreciated, and they no longer use mountains and rivers as an imagery symbol to express their intention to retreat. What they enjoy is leisure itself, travel itself, and they make no secret of their affection for “playthings” (玩物), they don’t seem to mind at all if others scold them for “losing the ambition” (丧志). Traveling can be seen as a purely recreational activity, which has inherent legitimacy in itself. It no longer has to carry any kind of Tao (道).

3. Conclusion

To sum up, by the Ming Dynasty (明代), the aesthetic form was no longer used and utilized as a passive carrier of spiritual connotations and hierarchical order, a self-sufficient and inner fullness of existence. Literati can depict a certain type of plant in exquisite and delicate detail just because they like its form, without having to depict plum, orchid, pine, chrysanthemum or bamboo just to show their noble character. The form itself has acquired a legitimate status and a reasonable identity. In some cases, the asymmetry between form and content is even presented in an extreme way, that is, the connotation approaches zero, while the form tends to be infinite, such as clothing and furniture in the late Ming Dynasty (明代). Moreover, the form even gained a certain ideological political power in a broad sense. The Ming Dynasty (明代) people’s pursuit of exquisite clothing eliminated the hierarchical order, and the universal emphasis on interior decoration meant that elegant and fine taste was no longer the privilege of the intellectual elite. The emphasis and highlighting on pure physical image and spatial structure in some literati paintings actually represents that the creators have abandoned traditional elements that symbolize literati nature, such as aura, spiritual resemblance, special symbols and literati character. This is the power of form itself. The subversion and inversion between “wén” (literature, in Chinese “文”) and “dào” (Tao, in Chinese “道”) is a subversive force that might destroy the original way of thinking. Although this shift in aesthetic thinking did not bring about any substantial social change, it had a profound impact on the artistic creation and art collection of that era, as well as the aesthetic behavior of later generations.

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